

Euphemism and contextual beliefs in gender-related issues in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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Abstract

This study examined how euphemism and contextual beliefs are deplored in discourse to characterise gender issues in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* in order to determine the contextual beliefs associated with such euphemistic expressions. Euphemism and contextual beliefs are essential in understanding the ways by which literary writers depict social issues through lexical and stylistic choices. The study adopts aspects of politeness theory, and the contextual beliefs (CBs) model. Excerpts from the novel that are related to widowhood/widowerhood experiences are subjected to lexical and discourse analyses. Two CBs are categorised as widowhood/widowerhood issues in the novel: Shared Knowledge of Patriarchal Laxity (SKPL) and Shared Knowledge of Loneliness/Companionship Search (SKL/CS). These CBs projected the euphemistic expressions with different underlying structures for widowhood and widowerhood practices respectively. The study found that euphemism and contexts are correlated because context could influence the interpretation of euphemism or restrict its application. Evidently, euphemism and contextual beliefs transform into a significant whole which novelists use in the gendered construction of widowhood/widowerhood.

Keywords: Euphemism. Contextual Beliefs. Politeness theory. Gender discourse. *Measuring Time*.

Introduction

Helon Habila's novel - *Measuring Time* (henceforth *MT*) - is one of the contemporary novels that have revealed gender-related issues in an African community. His rigorous lexical and stylistic presentation of widowhood/widowerhood and the apparent situated euphemistic expressions go a long way to spell out as well as provide insights into the euphemism-culture interface in social issues. Essentially, Habila's use of language showcases the operational link of real-life situations and their literary contexts as reflected in a typical African community. Despite this linguistic display of euphemism and contextual beliefs associated with widowhood/widowerhood practices, linguistic studies on Habila's *MT* (e.g., Foden 2007; Senayon 2011; Yeibo and Alabrabra 2011) have not paid attention to the way

euphemism and contextual beliefs are used in reflecting widowhood/widowerhood-related gender issues in the novel. An investigation of euphemism and its associated contextual beliefs in relation to widowhood/widowerhood issues will not only draw attention to the fact that the euphemistic strength of a word depends greatly on its context, but also accentuate the seemingly inseparable link between euphemistic language, contextual beliefs, and widowhood/widowerhood issues, ultimately highlighting how these phenomena are constructed in social practices.

In literary discourses, there are studies on euphemism (e.g., Kelly 2011; Aboh 2013; Ezeife 2017), yet these studies have not paid attention to how novelists employ euphemistic expressions in characterising

widowhood/widowerhood practices of a people. (Kelly 2011) examines the uses of euphemistic language and concealed erotic content in Charlotte Brontë's novels *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. Specifically, the study explores variations in the deployment of euphemism in Charlotte Brontë's novels. It illustrates the importance of recognizing the connection between surface-level ideologies and underlying realities created by euphemism, and how Brontë uses this connection to probe social norms. The author emphasizes that euphemism (non-direct language) is especially helpful to authors who mean to convey a concept that is difficult or forbidden. Nevertheless, the author did not examine the relationship that exists between euphemism and contextual beliefs in relation to widowhood/widowerhood issues in the novels.

Aboh's (2013) study centres on how proverbs and euphemisms are used as discourse strategies in Joe Ushie's poetry to question the socio-political disturbances and self-indulgence in Nigerian society. It reveals that the Bette-Bendi proverbs and euphemisms Ushie appropriates serve as the linguistic armoury which he depends on to question and rebuff socio-political and socioeconomic challenges that encumber the collective existence of the Nigerian populace. It concludes that some studies on proverbs and euphemisms tend to undermine the cathartic as well as revolutionary strength with which such strategies are imbued. However, the present study significantly departs from the concerns of Aboh (2013). On the other hand, Ezeife (2017) examines the euphemistic language used in the expression of gender

issues in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*. The study uses Warren's model of euphemism in illustrating how language use supports society's expectations and cultural conditions in shaping gender relations, as well as exploring the use of language in gender issues and politics in the said novel. It observes that euphemism is an indispensable tenet of African communication, and this supports the belief that politics is strongly involved in its use in propagating social and cultural undertones. Ezeife (2017) concludes that masculinity and femininity are societal euphemisms for male dominance and female subordination since euphemisms satisfy the linguistic need in upholding cultural beliefs on gender issues for writers and speakers. However, it differs from the present study due to its inability to explore the relationship between

euphemism and contextual beliefs.

Also, there are studies on gender-related issues such as Ojukwu and Onuigbo (2018) and Ogbodo and Yong (2020). Ojukwu and Onuigbo (2018) examined "gender and sexuality: Analysis of female crisis in Buchi Emecheta's novel". This study was anchored on literary feminist theory. According to these authors, women, as portrayed by Buchi Emecheta, are handicapped simply because they are female. The female gender crisis in Buchi Emecheta's novels was investigated, and it was discovered that persistent inequality between men and women is the result of culturally imposed social values that are contradictory. The predicament of being a girl child, societal conspiracy against womanhood, women as the chattel of trade and property for sale, polygamy, and patriarchal

tyranny are all themes that appear in her works. According to Buchi Emecheta, education is the most important tool for combating gender inequality.

Ogbodo and Yong (2020) investigated gender-related issues in their study of Buchi Emecheta's *Slave Girl* and *Head above Water*. They argue that if one considers the Biblical story of creation, women have been marginalised since the beginning of time. According to these authors, the African woman's story needs to be told loudly and critically in order to make it a current issue in a world that must be constantly aware of cultural injustice. For as long as she has lived, the black woman who lives in the geographic and cultural space south of the Sahara has been the brunt of culturally and historically imposed marginalisation. In virtually every domain of

human endeavour, she has been battered, trampled on, and relegated to the background for centuries. Therefore, *MT* offers useful insights into the link between euphemism and contextual beliefs in explaining widowhood/widowerhood issues. It reveals how contextual beliefs project euphemistic expressions with different underlying structures for widowhood and widowerhood practices. Hence, this paper evaluates how euphemistic language and contextual beliefs are deployed to portray widowhood/widowerhood issues in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*.

Euphemism and Widowhood/Widowerhood

Euphemism is a linguistic and cultural phenomenon that refers to the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend people or suggest something unpleasant.

Depending on the context, the basic function of euphemism is to avoid taboos, to be polite and to disguise. Euphemism can be used as a shield to maintain human communication, upgrade and downgrade people, promote, attack, save face, humiliate or honour people. It is defined by McArthur (1996) as a word or an expression which is delicate and inoffensive and is used to replace or cover a term that seems to be either taboo, too harsh or simply inappropriate for a given conversational exchange. Similarly, Allan and Burrige (1991) define it as "an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party" (p. 11). In social interaction, people always try to avoid the use of taboos, being impolite or hurting others' feelings in

speech. Therefore, the use of euphemism may significantly connote *face-saving* during communication. *Face* is the public self-image that every member of society wants to claim for himself. Therefore, such mutual self-interest requires that people maintain both their own and other interactors' face. Allan and Burrige (1991) stipulate that an interesting perspective on the human psyche is to be gained from the study of euphemism used "as a protective shield against the anger or disapproval of natural or supernatural beings" (p. 5). Furthermore, Allan & Burrige paid attention to the correlation between euphemism and context, suggesting that context could influence the interpretation of euphemism or restrict the application of euphemism. By implication, euphemism is described as an expression that seeks to avoid being

offensive, thus defined with reference to *face*.

Moreover, the issue of widowhood/widowerhood is culturally determined; and the use of euphemism is paramount in such contexts. Widowhood/widowerhood is a reality, since people are born and people die. Widows and widowers are found in every community. In Africa, the experience of the widow is such that women dread being widows. Most times, this brings about radical changes in the woman's social status and lifestyle. Therefore, widowhood/widowerhood practices pertain to the treatments given to a bereaved person (man or woman) who lost his/her spouse and is yet to remarry. A widow or widower is a woman or man whose spouse has died. Owen (1998) argues that widowhood tends to impact more traumatically on the woman, altering forever the way she is perceived and

consequently affecting her self-image.

Widowhood/widowerhood is a traumatic life experience for many people. It is a condition that should naturally evoke sympathetic treatment but, unfortunately, it attracts ill-treatment in many cases. There are some societal practices that a bereaved person, especially one who has not remarried, is expected to observe. These are the socio-cultural expectations on a widow or widower. Reactions to the death of a man as husband or a woman as a wife are culturally determined. Each culture determines the rationality of practices relating to widowhood and mourning rites. Africans are very sensitive towards how phenomena and conditions are talked about or named, especially in relation to widowhood/widowerhood situations. Culturally, some euphemistic expressions are used for

the sake of politeness or pleasantness, perhaps to avoid or conceal something. Thus, in the widowhood/widowerhood context, politeness and disguise mechanisms are typically used to indicate social practices.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present work adopts aspects of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, and those of contextual beliefs (CBs) Model.

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness distinguishes between negative and positive politeness strategies. Negative politeness strategies are strategies that are performed to avoid offence through deference, respect, etc., while positive politeness strategies are those that are performed to avoid offence by emphasizing friendliness. Additionally,

this theory echoes the term "face" introduced by the sociologist Ervin Goffman. In the context of politeness, "face" describes the wish of every member of a community to guard his or her face against possible damage through social interferences. There are negative face and positive face. While negative face involves the wish to be unimpeded by others in one's actions, positive face entails the desire to gain the approval of others. In other words, speech acts become acts of negative politeness when they match the negative face want of either the speaker or the addressee; for example, emphasis on social distance, use of apologies, formal language, and deference. Those speech acts attending to the positive face want of an interlocutor are considered to be acts of positive politeness; they include an offer of friendship,

compliments, showing direct interest, and hearty expressions. Thus, these strategies enable interactants to create a maximally comfortable environment for communication. The core of this theory is that in everyday life, we design messages that protect face and fortify successful communication. In this study, politeness is often a goal in widowhood/widowerhood communication because it is a culturally universal value.

Contextual Beliefs (CBs) Model

Odebunmi's (2006) model of context emphasizes shared knowledge and beliefs that exist among interactants. It states that context "presupposes mutual contextual beliefs on which participants relate and make inferences," and sees context as the "linguistic, socio-cultural and psychological background

from which the meaning of a word springs" (2006, p. 25). Contextual beliefs are, therefore, assumptions held by interactants that precede an interaction with others. These assumptions may have been acquired or maybe an ongoing acquisition process during an interaction (van Dijk 2001). Odebunmi (2006) categorises contextual beliefs into two levels of beliefs: language level and situation level beliefs. According to him, language level beliefs are indicated by interactants' understanding of the language of communication. On the other hand, the situation level deals with the assumptions, which "are held on the basis of interactants' shared code (linguistic and non-linguistic) and experience" (Odebunmi, 2006a, p. 28). This study adopts the latter. Odebunmi suggests that it is at the situation level that the variety of the language selected and

other situational variables are used to process meaning. At the situation level, beliefs cover interactants' shared knowledge of subject/topic; shared knowledge of word choices, referents and references; and shared knowledge of socio-cultural experiences, previous and immediate. Shared contextual beliefs help in the interpretation of meaning when interactants portray aspects of their knowledge that they share with other participants. In this study, shared knowledge on widowhood/widowerhood experiences as explicated in the sampled novel.

Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

Measuring Time (MT), Helon Habila's second novel, is an interesting story that revolves around the small town of Keti. It is also about a story about Lamang, a domineering, status-obsessed father, and his

twins: Mamo and LaMamo. It was published by Cassava Republic in 2007. *MT* is full of farce, touching various spheres of life: education, gender, responsibility, war, colonial inheritance, etc. Specifically, there are cases of widows and women being dehumanized in the novel. Zara, for instance, is maltreated in her marriage until she leaves in search of peace and fulfilment. A schemer from his youth, Lamang married the beautiful but sickly Tabita whose father waives the bride price and showers him with gifts. Having lost their mother at birth, the twins find another mother in their father's sister, Auntie Marina, who herself is a victim of a failed marriage. This story is a sociopolitical narrative that portrays scenes of political infighting and the degeneration of women. Tabita's loss of senses after the death of her husband depicts the

societal view of females' severe attachment to males, while Lamang's life, surrounded by other women, especially the widows, exposes the society's low regard for females, and the difference in the widowhood/widowerhood experiences of men and women.

Analysis and Findings

Euphemism is an indispensable tool of African communication, and therefore evident in African narratives. Its use in the sampled novel can hardly be detached from the meanings of the daily cultural existence of the Nigerian people. Two CBs thematise widowhood/widowerhood issues in the novel: Shared knowledge of patriarchal laxity (SKPL) and Shared knowledge of loneliness/companionship search (SKL/CS). The language of the novel exposes shared knowledge of these CBs through

euphemisms used by/among characters during interactions, and those of the novelist in his authorial interventions. The euphemistic expressions which are projected through the CBs have two underlying structures each, which are discussed below.

Shared Knowledge of Patriarchal Laxity (SKPL)

Shared knowledge of patriarchal laxity portrays the lack of discipline associated with some widowers society. It suggests some characteristics of negligence which men exhibit towards themselves and their children after the death of their wives. Despite the patriarchal norms of the society of text, widowhood tends to weaken a man's power. The two fundamental structures that sustain Patriarchal laxity are that: (1) the belief that women absorb and adapt to shock easier than men (widowers get

psychologically and physically weaker than women after their spouses' death); and (2) widowers have difficulty in taking care of their children (especially 'minors') alone. Below are some instances.

Following Tabita's death at childbirth, the twins (Mamo and Lamamo) were left for her husband, Lamang, to cater for. The children stayed with a distant aunt until their father took them back to stay with him. That was when Auntie Marina (Lamang's sister) took over the welfare of these children. These children hated their father and planned to leave home because of Lamang's inability to care for them. Because of Mamo's sickly

disposition, he stayed back and refused to tell anybody about his brother's whereabouts. In the process, the following conversations occurred

between him and Lamang (his father).

"What do you think people would say if you had died out there? They would blame me for not caring for you, for driving you out of my house. Tell me, is there anything that you lack in this house? Is there anything I haven't provided for you and your brother?"

We have everything, ... except your love (MT, p. 57-58).

The foregoing excerpt is filled with euphemistic rhetorical questions. They are used by Lamang to make people believe that he is a caring father, an attempt to save his positive face. However, Mamo's response presented Lamang as an uncaring father, an attack on his negative face. Again, the response, *we have everything, ... except your love* is euphemistic because it mildly promotes

Lamang rather than condemning him completely. In fact, the euphemism and its co-text help in establishing the fact that widowers have difficulty in taking care of their children (especially 'minors'). Unfortunately, Mamo's belief that they have everything except their father's love underscores the fact that Lamang portrays laxity towards his children. Another supporting instance is presented in the authorial intrusion below.

Lamang never took much interest in his children; he left them in the care of their aunt Marina, ...and the village widows who occasionally dropped in to help with the housework and to generally advertise their availability to once again eligible Lamang (MT, p. 16).

It is pertinent to state that one can either have an interest in something or

not. However, in the above instance, the narrator uses euphemism to maintain the seeming notion of the inability of a widower to manage his home properly and to take good care of himself and his children. The expression *Lamang never took much interest in his children* is euphemistic. Basically, it is used to shield Lamang's negligence, making it mild thereby promoting his ego as a man and saving his positive face. One may ask how we can quantify the adjective 'much' in such a situation. Invariably, the novelist does not want to tell us that Lamang never had an interest in his children after his wife's death. So, he politely underlines Lamang's interest in his children as 'little' against the supposed great interest of a parent. This goes a long way to imply the shared knowledge of patriarchal laxity in widowhood/widowerhood issues where widowers are

psychologically and physically weaker than their women counterparts. Through this, the societal view of male dominance is unveiled.

Some practices such as the seeming inability of a widower to manage his home properly, and to take good care of himself and his children, are subsumed under this contextual consciousness. Evidently, Habila is reflecting, in *MT*, the situation, as it exists in his society: the premium placed on women and childcare in the family. This is seen in the next dialogue between Mamo and Lamamo's wife.

"This is my aunt," he said, "Lamamo must have told you that our mother died the day we were born. Auntie Marina is the one who brought us up. She is our mother" (*MT*, p. 304).

The expression *she is our mother* is implicitly used as a euphemism. It is a

declarative sentence that clearly affirms the notion that widowerhood poses a lot of challenges to men especially when it comes to home management and childcare. This suggests that the special attachment between women and children might be lacking in men. In fact, Mamo used the above example when he was telling Lamamo's wife about their family, after Lamamo's death. During their conversation, Mamo used the euphemism to politely tell her that Lamang, their father, could not take care of them. This declarative euphemistic simple sentence respectfully shields Lamang's act of negligence as a father and keeps away any offensive interpretation of his inattention and his inability to care for his children. Evidently, the writer uses an avoidance strategy to courteously circumvent making unpleasant remarks about Lamang (a fellow man). On

the other hand, the euphemistic expression indicates positive politeness that is used to save and promote Auntie Marina's positive face needs. Therefore, the expression displays shared knowledge of patriarchal laxity on the part of widowed Lamang and promotes the fact that, in most African marriages, women are expected to be caring. Perhaps, it is immoral for a woman not to take care of her children even after her spouse's demise.

Even when Lamang's political career was shattered, some widows rally round him to use him as a shield against some obnoxious practices the society may force them into. The conversation below between Mamo and Zara supports this fact.

"The widows stayed by him, perhaps hoping to take him unawares now that he was weak, his

defenses down" (MT, p. 116).

This expression is euphemistic. Lamang is a man, and a man connotes power in the text. The implication of the above euphemistic expression, therefore, is that even in the shared knowledge of patriarchal laxity, when a man leaves himself uncared for, the widowed women still crave for him, an indication of his power and relevance. Evidently, *to take him unawares now that he was weak, his defenses down* implies that even in his frailty, the widows still find strength in him (because he is a man). Furthermore, *his defenses down* not only signifies that women absorb and adapt to shock easier than men, but upholds one of the basic structures that sustain this contextual belief that widowers get psychologically and physically weaker than widows. Perhaps, *his defenses won't be down if*

his wife is still alive. Therefore, it can be interpreted that this euphemism shields Lamang's inattention towards himself and promotes his positive face by politely presenting the widows as still admiring to him. In fact, the whole expression is used to save the positive face want of Lamang and attack the widows' face.

Shared Knowledge of Loneliness/Companionship Search (SKL/CS)

Shared knowledge of loneliness/companionship search implies the act of loneliness associated with widowhood/widowerhood lifestyle. It also involves the imminent search for a companion from an individual after the death of a spouse either for pleasure or protection, or for other ends. Mostly, women do it to seek shield and support, while men do so generally for pleasure. The two essential structures that uphold this

CB are that: (1) the belief that widowhood/widowerhood is associated with solitary life; (2) widowers freely seek companions (from the opposite sex) with power, while widows follow suit with submission mostly for protection. Examples of euphemisms that demonstrate this CB in the sampled novel are shown below.

The next discourse captures the authorial narration of a function in Keti where some lonely widows attended in search of recognition from the opposite sex.

Interspersed amid the male laughter were a few female voices. The widows. They'd be seated discreetly on the outside of the semicircle of men, or hovering by the door, refilling empty water cups, ...battling eyelashes as they came in, fingering their permed hair beneath their scarves as they passed in front of the

men, and the men would pause momentarily from their arguments as the women passed, to savor the whiff of soap and perfume - and soup (MT, p. 75).

From the foregoing, it can be inferred that the text's society believes widows have lost their shield, and subsequently need another one to keep life going. Probably, that is why the writer euphemistically noted their quiet stay in the event: *They'd be seated discreetly on the outside of the semicircle of men, or hovering by the door.* By implication, the widows are hiding; their place is isolated unlike that of men, yet the narrator politely describes such act as 'discreet' perhaps to save their positive face. Another euphemistic expression is *in refilling empty water cups, the widows are equally battling eyelashes as they came in, fingering their permed hair*

beneath their scarves as they passed in front of the men. Evidently, the phrase is politely constructed to illustrate the widows' varied methods of wooing men, hunting for their attention. Significantly, the excerpt indicates that the widows *battle eyelashes and finger their permed hair beneath their scarves as [only when] they passed in front of the men.*

Invariably, all these are tactics employed by the widows to submissively draw the attention of men to themselves. They are, therefore, indirect (polite) substitutes that the writer uses to replace the antagonistic and tabooed language associated with widowhood. All these are encapsulated in the shared knowledge of loneliness/companionship, indicating how widowed women are represented in society, and how their actions are interpreted. From all indications, the term *widow* has a semantic

connotation of lack and powerlessness in the community presented by the writer. Apparently, these euphemistic expressions reinforce male power and female subjugation through the use of less irritating words. By so doing, the narrator upholds face-threatening act with redress.

In the next example, the widows are seen struggling to cook and serve the politicians and other people who came to identify with the new politician, Lamang. Here, widowhood is associated with solitary life; and widows' search for male companions is linked to their intention of visiting Lamang and cooking for his politician friends.

The three women were the remainders from a larger group of widows who had hovered hopefully around Lamang after his wife's death. On days like

this they'd politely but firmly take over the kitchen from Auntie Marina to cook for the TV viewers and the politician, hoping by this to catch the elusive Lamang (MT, p. 75).

It is not uncommon for widow(er)s to experience loneliness after their spouses' demise. Meanwhile, Lamang is portrayed as a schemer who has the attention of some widows in the village since he lost his wife. In the larger society, the actions of these widows in search of companionship have negative connotations attached to them. The euphemisms that depict this notion are encapsulated in the expression *hovered hopefully around Lamang after his wife's death and hoping by this to catch the elusive Lamang*. In other words, the widows are struggling to win Lamang's affection, and probably get married to him, and take

him as their shield. To describe a woman as *hover(ing) hopefully* around a widower and *hoping by this to catch the elusive [widower]* (Lamang is a polite way of saying that such a lady is flirting with the man in anticipation of getting his attention. The implication of these euphemisms and the associated contextual consciousness is that those women struggle to be with Lamang so as to be protected from the antagonistic widowhood social system. Also, the euphemistic expression helps both Lamang and the widows to avoid losing their self-respect. All of these indicate that challenging this male power system is difficult because the widower (Lamang) is the 'focus' which the widows run to, for companionship and protection. Another instance is seen below when the narrator is talking about the widows' lonely lifestyles, and what

they do sometimes to keep themselves busy, hoping to get the attention of men. It is an authorial intrusion that describes how widows battle with loneliness.

Yet there was something asexual about these women in their forties and fifties battle loneliness and midlife crisis with powdered faces and painted lips and ... trying so hard to capture the fading bloom in their lives before it finally fell off the stem (*MT*, p. 77).

The principle of weakness obviously comes into play in the foregoing discourse. Obviously, the whole expression exposes how some widows confront lonely lifestyle and age management after their husbands' death. The writer politely expresses how such women organize their lives firmly amidst all odds. From the foregoing, the use

of euphemism is apparent as the distasteful 'path' of widowhood is given indirect reference. By so doing, positive politeness is expressed to make their ugly experiences look ameliorated. It is obvious that politeness is highly valued in the society portrayed by the narrator, and so, euphemisms are encouraged to reduce the embarrassment that may arise from direct expressions. The narrator takes into account the positive and negative face wants of the widows by avoiding being impolite in authorial comments. In other words, those euphemisms are "cosmetic words" used to disguise widowhood anguish. All of these are in line with the idea that widowhood is associated with solitary life and widows submissively seek companionship to shield their agony. Ironically, the trauma that follows the death of a

spouse seems to be greater for widows than widowers. In the case of the loss of the husband, the wife sometimes becomes the primary suspect regarding the cause of the husband's death, and she is thus treated as such. On the other hand, when a man loses his wife, the man is almost immediately offered a substitution to comfort him and douse the impact of his bereavement. When Lamang died, the widows expressed serious grief, and Mamo was surprised, hence the following declaration:

Next to her were the three widows, standing together, holding each other and crying. They had grieved more than anyone else in the past two days; at first I thought they were overdoing it, but now I realize that they were not only grieving for my father, they were also grieving for

themselves. While he was alive my father had given them one gift no one else had given them in a long time: he had looked at them not as aging mothers and hopeless widows, but with desire. While he was alive he had stood between them and abhorrent age; now that he was gone, their own protection against reality was gone (MT, p. 186).

The differentiation between men's and women's roles in society is one of complementary and superior relationships in favour of men. This is evident in the above excerpt. We are meant to believe that the death of Lamang is the loss of the widows' *protection against reality*. Possibly, the tradition robs the widows of their rights and privileges, hence their search for a man to protect them. However, when Lamang died, the widows who used

to hover around him grieved more than anyone else probably because of the economic, socio-cultural and psychological problems they are going to face thereafter. During his lifetime, Lamang loved and cared for them; now they feel that their travails will resurface. Therefore, Lamang was politely described as a man who *had given them one gift no one else had given them in a long time: he had looked at them not as aging mothers and hopeless widows, but with desire*. The foregoing euphemistic expressions accommodate the positive face wants of Lamang. Meanwhile, the narrator impeded on the widows' positive and negative face wants, hence the expression: *The three women were the remainders from a larger group of widows who had hovered hopefully around Lamang after his wife's death*. The notions of *remainders* and *hovered* as used in that context are

derogatory. Indirectly, the widows are presented as leftovers from the multitude of women flirting over Lamang in search of security. All these enhance the notion of a solitary life that is associated with widowhood/widowerhood.

Conclusion

The study has investigated euphemism and contextual beliefs that characterise widowhood/widowerhood issues in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* in order to determine the contextual beliefs associated with such euphemistic expressions. It has applied politeness theory and situation model of context to the analyse excerpts from the novel that are related to widowhood/widowerhood experiences. Two CBs were identified as characterising widowhood/widowerhood issues in the novel: Shared Knowledge of Patriarchal Laxity (SKPL) and Shared

Knowledge of Loneliness/Companionship Search (SKL/CS). The two structures that sustain SKPL are that: widowers get psychologically and physically weaker than widows after their wives' death; and widowers have difficulty in taking care of their children (especially 'minors') alone. In SKL/CS, the two basic configurations that explain it are that: widowhood/widowerhood is associated with a solitary life, and widowers freely seek companionship (from the opposite sex), while widows seek submission and protection. The study has established that novelists combine euphemism and contextual beliefs in the construction of widowhood/widowerhood issues. As such, euphemism and contexts are correlated because context influences the interpretation of euphemism or restricts its application. In essence, indirectness in polite

African discourse is applied when referring to widows/widowers whose existence is sometimes humiliating. These findings contribute to the study of euphemism, contextual beliefs and widowhood/widowerhood practices and discourse in the Nigerian novel.

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